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ADCI Robert M. Gates
Bi-Partisan Leadership Meeting
Tuesday, 15 March 1988, 1000 - 1100 hours
Cabinet Room, White House

(Pls Return to Exec Staff)

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14 March 1988

President to press Wright for new vote on Contra aid

By Jeremiah O'Leary
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Reagan will ask House Speaker Jim Wright to schedule a vote this week on a new aid package for the Nicaraguan resistance in a last-ditch bid to save the rebels from a "disastrous" situation, said White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker.

"What we're doing right now is witnessing the unraveling of the Contras," said Mr. Baker in an interview Friday with The Washington Times. "Unless we get aid for them pretty soon, it's going to be disastrous."

"And it's going to be laid at the doorstep of Congress for refusing to go forward with aid," he said.

In a wide-ranging interview, Mr. Baker also said Mr. Reagan would not be under pressure to sign an arms reduction treaty at the May meeting in Moscow with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

"The president has made it clear that he is not going to Moscow under pressure to complete any particular undertaking and, certainly, not, to force the completion of a strategic arms treaty [START]," Mr. Baker said.

"While it is possible that we could have a START treaty ready for signature in Moscow, it is not likely," he said.

On other matters, Mr. Baker said:

• Mr. Reagan will remain neutral in the presidential race until after the New Orleans Republican convention in August and he will not only actively campaign for the Re-

publican presidential nominee but also will help GOP candidates in key congressional races.

• When the Moscow summit is over, Mr. Reagan will travel to Brussels, Belgium, to discuss the meeting with the NATO leaders and then fly to London to consult British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

• The Soviets are "not being very helpful" about the U.N. resolution calling for an arms embargo against Iran and Iraq. He said the United States has "no good indications" that the Soviets will join the rest of the Security Council to pass the arms embargo now that China has signaled its support for the measure.

• He expected Mr. Reagan to protest at the summit the Soviet supply of sophisticated arms to Nicaragua's Marxist government. "He will point out that their continuation of support for the Sandinistas is an obstacle to further improvement in the relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union."

The rebels battling the Sandinista regime have been without U.S. assistance since the last installment of short-term, non-lethal aid ran out Feb. 29.

Mr. Baker said Mr. Reagan is scheduled to meet with congressional leaders tomorrow and will appeal to them to schedule a vote on a new aid package for the resistance this week.

"It is urgently important that the House leadership and the Senate leadership consider the plight of the freedom fighters, consider that time is running out and that action must be undertaken," Mr. Baker said.

The president "will talk to the speaker [Mr. Wright]" about a bipartisan aid package for the Contras.

that can be voted on this week, Mr. Baker said.

"Time is going to run out," Mr. Baker said. "We are trying very hard to put together a package that will enjoy not only unanimous bipartisan support, but that can be dealt with quickly and salvage a very bad situation that has resulted from the refusal of the House" to approve more aid.

Last month, the House voted 219-211 to reject Mr. Reagan's request for \$36 million in aid to the resistance. That package included \$3.6 million in lethal assistance.

Earlier this month, the House also voted 216-208 to reject a \$30 million aid bill — offered by Mr. Wright and other House Democratic leaders as an alternative to the president's package — that would have provided about \$16 million in purely humanitarian aid for the rebels.

House Democratic leaders have been cool to the idea of another vote on rebel aid since their alternative bill was defeated. Any further aid probably will be considered under normal, time-consuming congressional procedures rather than expedited procedures, the Democratic leaders said.

Mr. Wright last week said that "there is a weariness with the Contra issue" in Congress.

He also warned a group of senators who are trying to draft their own aid bill that procedural roadblocks may be in their way, since the Constitution gives the House, not the Senate, the power to appropriate money.

Republicans have been considering a \$2 billion fiscal 1988 supplemental appropriations bill — most of which is earmarked for the Veterans Administration — as the next possible vehicle for a Contra aid amendment.

• Jennifer Spevacek contributed to this report.

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